

# Caregiver Connection

December 2008

A monthly publication for Washington state foster and adoptive families and relative caregivers

## The December Dilemma



Foster care is made up of caring and compassionate people who have made the decision to care for other people's children within our own homes. The quality of care we give to those children is based on our values and attitudes, as well as the skills we have gained through our life experiences that have been enhanced through formal training. Most of us hold some kind of religious, spiritual, or philosophical preference that is at the very core of who we are as individuals and as members of our greater community. Our convictions often direct and influence how we care for, and influence those for whom we are responsible.

Every December, private and public agencies, children, and caregivers face the sometimes challenging dilemma of acknowledging and honoring the various religious and secular holiday traditions celebrated during this time of year while remaining true to our own traditions.

As with many dilemmas, the December dilemma presents an opportunity to learn and grow, to develop a greater bond with the children in our care and in turn improve their quality of life. Children who are confident their cultural beliefs and customs are valued feel valued themselves. Children who have books or other items in their environment which reflect their culture and traditions

feel visible and important. Foster families and relative caregivers who go the extra mile to learn about Hanukkah or Solstice or Kwanzaa demonstrate their interest in a child's identity. Many families learn that the various celebrations share similar messages and meanings. Being open to learning about many beliefs does not mean sacrificing our own beliefs. Families have the opportunity to look at the similarities shared by many

beliefs, especially during the winter holidays, and reinforce shared values such as unity, generosity, sharing, hope, love, and kindness.

While an open and accepting attitude toward faith, culture, and holidays is just good practice in terms of valuing children and building upon their strengths, we are also given specific legal direction when it comes to practices of faith. Washington Administration Code 388-148-0430 offers direction and guidance to the Department and to caregivers but the law does not eliminate the strong feelings we may experience exploring unfamiliar, unknown, and sometimes frightening beliefs. Regardless of the feelings we face when honoring the beliefs of children in our care, the law is very clear:

### **Washington Administration Code 388-148-0430 – May I take a foster child to church services, temple, mosque or synagogue?**

- You may have a child attend church services, temple, mosque, or synagogue, if the child chooses to participate.
- You must respect the religious backgrounds or preferences of the children under your care.
- Children have the right to practice their own faith.
- Children have the right not to practice your faith without consequences.

## Regional Foster Parent Representatives

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LEFT TO RIGHT: Adam,  
Austin, Alfie (dad), Kurtis

Photo by Greg Cook

## Meet the Bensinger family

Alfie Bensinger was a single dad and soccer coach whose son had grown up and moved out. Alfie kept thinking he had a big house and he ought to either put it to good use or sell it. Alfie coached a couple of boys who were in foster care so he knew there was a need and he thought opening the house to foster kids “was the way to go.”

When Alfie’s son was growing up, there were always eight or ten kids over at the house. Now he is still likely to have eight or ten kids piled in front of their mammoth television set, but most of them live there.

The house is filled with trophies the boys have won for Motocross and other sports. Alfie has become the legal guardian for 17-year-old Kurtis and 14-year-old Adam. He also fosters 12-year-old Austin and another 14-year-old boy. Alfie said, “My boys aren’t foster kids, they belong to me.” Alfie also said, “I just wanted kids who needed someone to love them.”

He’s very clear about why he keeps fostering after eight years, “It’s totally selfish.” He wants people who are considering fostering to know that, “there’s good stuff and there’s bad stuff but the good certainly outweighs the bad.”

Alfie tells the story about a serious motorcycle accident he had about four years ago. Even he didn’t realize how bad the wreck was until he read the discharge report and it included details of his resuscitation. He half jokingly talks of getting to the pearly gates and St. Pete saying, “Your work’s not done yet, you better get back down there.”

Alfie Bensinger found a way to open a big house and a bigger heart to kids who need them most.

You can too.

## The holidays are not always filled with joy for some children

The holidays have many meanings for many different people and children.—for most of us the holiday season is full of joy, family, and tradition. However, every year an estimated 513,000 children in America will spend the holidays in foster care or relative care. They may spend their holidays adapting to a different home, family, friends, pets, traditions, celebrations, and expectations.

“We all get a little depressed around the holidays usually more than any other time...I know that at times I can’t help but cry when I think of my family and what they are up to and if they even think of me at times like this but there really isn’t anything I can do but pull myself together and pray that they are safe and for God to give me strength to be a good person and know that one day this will all be over and I one day will have a choice in the matter...” Foster youth, age 17 and in care for over a year.

It can be difficult to know what to do, but there are several actions you can take to help your foster or adopted child deal with their mixed emotions during the holidays.

Talk with the kids in your home about their beliefs, culture, faith, and values and share yours with them. As parents, we all know that while we are teaching our children many things about life and relationships, they are teaching us many of the same lessons. This is one such opportunity to learn from and celebrate one another.

### LOTS OF EMOTIONS

Unfortunately, for a child in foster care or relative care, or an older adopted child, the holidays can bring about feelings of loss, separation, and grief. This is especially true when the

child is old enough to have memories from past seasons.

- Allow the child to talk about their feelings in their own way – resist the temptation to push them into talking about their past experiences.
- Find ways to incorporate a child’s remembered traditions their birth family participated in. Learn along side the child about their family traditions—by allowing room to hear about the child’s traditions will give the child a sense of pride and self-worth and maybe your family may gain a new family tradition to celebrate.

“I have never had a real family to spend the holidays with, ever since I went into foster care I have been in a different home every Christmas. This one factor ruins Christmas for me every year.” Foster youth age 17 and in foster care for 16 years.

Holidays or big family gatherings may be difficult situations for introducing your foster children to your extended family. Your extended family may feel uneasy about your choice to be a foster parent in the first place. Meeting the foster child/ren may either lessen your extended family’s anxiety or it may confirm their fears. Here are some things to consider when preparing your foster child and extended family for a gathering.

- Try to introduce your new foster children before the main holiday or family event. If this is not an option due to travel or time, try showing pictures of your extended family to





your foster child and go through their names prior to the event.

- Make sure to give the extended family time to be just with you and your child/ren. Consider busying the foster children with a game or movie to give your children time to visit with a visiting Aunt, for example. Some foster children are very attention seeking and may unknowingly “hog the show”. This may cause hard feelings within your family.
- Remember confidentiality. Most people care about the well-being of children. Some may ask what seems to be harmless questions about why your foster children are in care, but to answer these questions would mean breaking the confidentiality of your foster child and his/her birth family. Politely tell your family that you appreciate their concern. Then explain how you know that they’ll understand that keeping the children’s past confidential provides them more security and respect.
- Have gifts ready for the foster children at family holiday gift exchanges. Offer this to your extended family so that they don’t feel obligated to add to their already long buying lists. If they are able and willing to buy for the children be sure to tell them a bit about the kids and their interests.
- Go over basic manners and rules prior to the get-together. Go over ‘Thank You’, ‘Please’, and ‘Excuse me’ and the situations in which to use these words. Remind the children to say ‘Thank You’ even if they don’t like a gift. Go over other basics like no running in the house, table manners such as how food is passed, and chewing with their mouths closed. Consider practicing at home if time allows. Role plays can be fun.
- Pre-teach about the main holiday or family event. Go over the number of people that will probably attend. How loud will it be? Foster children can become frightened when they interpret a loud game of cards as a fight. Will there be a toy room at the event? How about a room where the kids are not allowed? Are there well known family rules you need to inform the children about? For example an Aunt that doesn’t allow visitors to wear shoes in the house.
- Pre-teach about the season. Do the children have a general knowledge about the holiday? Ask about their past holiday celebrations at home. Are they used to having a tree? Visiting Santa? Having a stocking? Do they understand the Easter season? Will seeing an Easter Pageant be scary for them? Some Easter Pageants can be quite graphic. They may be over whelmed if not scared by some traditional holiday events.

## Book Nook

### BOOK TITLE

## Twenty Things Adopted Kids Wish Their Adoptive Parents Knew

### AUTHOR

Sherrie Eldridge Books

### PUBLICATION YEAR

1999

### BOOK TITLE

## Talking With Young Children About Adoption

### AUTHOR

Mary Watkins Books

### PUBLICATION YEAR

1993

### BOOK TITLE

## W.I.S.E. Up Powerbook

### AUTHOR

Marilyn Schoettl Children’s Books

### PUBLICATION YEAR

2000

### ABSTRACT

This children’s book from the Center of Adoption Support and Education, Inc. (C.A.S.E.) is intended to give your children and you the tools to cope with the sometimes discomfiting comments, both personal and general, you sometimes get from others. Learn how and when to (W)alk away, say (I)t’s private, (S)hare, or (E)ducate. This booklet also comes with a 7-page (purple) Parent Guidebook.

## Did You Know?

You may be able to take an adoption tax credit for adopting a special needs child? You may be able to take a tax credit without having to document expenses if you receive adoption assistance for your special needs child. Your adoption support agreement is evidence that the state has determined your child to have special needs. Check with your tax adviser for more in depth and detailed information. If you have misplaced your agreement, contact your regional adoption support program listed at the top of this section to get a copy.

### ABSTRACT

This book, written by a woman who was adopted, herself, gives voice to children’s unspoken concerns and shows adoptive parents how to free their kids from feelings of fear, abandonment and shame. Eldridge reveals twenty complex emotional issues you must understand to nurture the child you love.

### ABSTRACT

This book, for parents of children ages two to ten, discusses what to say to adopted children and when to say it. It also explores how kids respond to the concept of adoption, how they incorporate it into their make-believe play, and what worries they have.

## Regional Contacts

### Region 1 – Spokane

Jan Lammers\* 509-363-3383  
Pam Copeland\* 509-363-3379

### Region 2 – Yakima

Steve Bergland\* 509-225-6500  
Carol Cyr 509-225-6531  
(Financial Specialist)

### Region 3 – Monroe

Steve Foster\* 360-805-3032  
Linda Richardson\* 360-805-3030

### Region 4 – Bellevue

Aaron Washington\* 425-590-3072  
Jenne Norris 425-590-3069  
(Social Worker)

### Region 5 – Tacoma

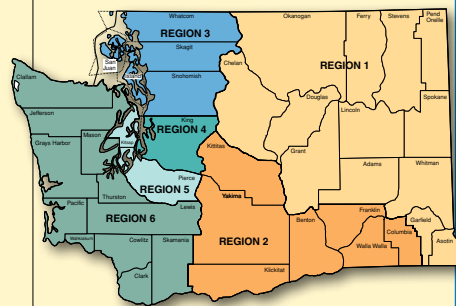
Cindy Anderson\* 253-983-6359  
Laura Davis\* 253-983-6281

### Region 6 – Tumwater

Cheryl Barrett\* 360-725-6758  
Kim Mower\* 360-725-6778

**Toll free number:** 1-800-562-5682  
(listen carefully to the recorded message)

\* Adoption Support Consultants



## Important numbers to know when you take care of children in out-of-home care

Foster Parent and Caregiver Crisis and Support Line: 1-800-301-1868

### ON-GOING AND CRISIS SUPPORTS FOR FOSTER PARENTS

Under contracts with the state, three private agencies are working to build supports for you within the foster care community. Supports include hubs, support groups, and matching new foster parents with veteran foster parents. To get connected:

- If you live in Eastern Washington, the Olympic Peninsula down through Pacific County or from Thurston County to Clark County, call 1-888-794-1794.
- If you live in King County, call 206-605-0664 and in any county from Snohomish County north, call 360-510-7601 or 360-863-6530.
- If you live in Pierce or Kitsap counties, call 253-473-9252.
- If you live in King County, the Friends of Youth CARE program provides short-term counseling, education and support to help you care for your most difficult children. 1-888-263-3457.

**Family Help Line:** 1-800-932-HOPE or [www.parenttrust.org](http://www.parenttrust.org). The Family Help Line is a free, statewide training and referral line for the families of Washington state. Last year, the Family Help Line received more than 5,000 calls and requests for information. Calls can last up to 90 minutes and parents can call as often as needed.

**Support for foster parents under investigation for allegations of abuse or neglect:** Foster Parent Investigation Retention Support Team (FIRST) 253-219-6782. Monday through Saturday, 8:00 a.m. – 8:00 p.m., or leave a message and receive a return call within 24 hours.

Foster Parent and Caregiver Crisis and Support Line: 1-800-301-1868

**Mental Health Crisis Line Information:** The crisis line telephone number for your county or region is available on the DSHS Mental Health Division website at: <http://www.dshs.wa.gov/mentalhealth/crisis.shtml>.

### GENERAL FOSTER PARENT INFORMATION FOR THE STATE OF WASHINGTON

**FPAWS:** Foster Parent Association of Washington State, 1-800-391-CARE (2273) or [www.fpaws.org](http://www.fpaws.org). FPAWS is seeking new members and supporting foster parents in many ways, including referrals to local associations.

**Kitsap and Pierce County information about becoming a foster parent or to receive foster parent support:** Foster Care Resource Network, 253-473-9252. Monday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. or leave a message and receive a return call by the next business day.

### RESOURCE INFORMATION AVAILABLE STATEWIDE

Get connected to information on resources in your area by calling 211 – a toll free number.

**Children's Administration Foster Parent Website:**  
<http://www.dshs.wa.gov/ca/fosterparents/>

**Children's Administration Foster Parent Training Website** – Trainings are open to all licensed foster parents, licensed relative caregivers and unlicensed caregivers. For information about foster parent and caregiver training, check out:  
<http://www.dshs.wa.gov/ca/fosterparents/training.asp>

### CHILDREN'S ADMINISTRATION FOSTER CARE LISTSERV

Join the 400 people who have subscribed to the List Serve  
<http://listserv.wa.gov/cgi-bin/wa?SUBED1=fosterparents&&A=1> for updated information on resources for the work you do in caring for children.

**Family Planning Services** are designed to help avoid unwanted or mistimed pregnancy and are available through your local Community Service Office (CSO). Each CSO has a full time Family Planning Nurse to help provide services to Medicaid eligible clients. There is also a Family Planning hotline number 1-800-770-4334.

## Statewide quarterly meeting – This is an opportunity for foster parents to be heard!

The purpose of the quarterly statewide consultation meeting is to improve communication between foster parents and Children's Administration centered on recruitment and retention of foster homes, effective foster parent training and other related issues.

Please take the opportunity to be heard – your input is important! Attending your regional quarterly meeting allows you to provide input to the regional foster parent representative who presents at the quarterly statewide meeting. Please contact your regional representatives for more information or:

**Michael Luque, MSW**

Foster Care & Kinship Care Program Manager  
Children's Administration  
360-902-7986 or email [lumi300@dshs.wa.gov](mailto:lumi300@dshs.wa.gov)  
-OR-

**Beth Canfield** at FPAWS at 800-391-2273 or [bethcanfield@comcast.net](mailto:bethcanfield@comcast.net).

## Independent living and transitional living programs for youth

Are you a foster parent with a youth in your home between ages 15-18? Have you recently had a youth emancipate from care who you know needs help with their transition to independence? If you answer yes to either of these questions the independent living or transitional living program may be a good resource.

These programs offer services to youth ages 15-18 and 18-21 through contracted providers. These programs help youth get ready to live on their own by working with them on topics which include:

- How to stretch your money
- How to get and keep a job
- How to find and keep safe housing
- How to prepare for education or training past high school

If you want more information about the services these programs offer and to determine if youth in your home are eligible please email [ilskids@dshs.wa.gov](mailto:ilskids@dshs.wa.gov) or you may call your regional Independent Living Coordinator.

Region 1	Gary McLuskie	509-363-3549
Region 2	Sandy Bradley	509-737-2810
Region 3	George Godzik	425-339-1763
Region 4	Jim Jones	206-923-4829
Region 5	Keith Fichter	253-983-6273
Region 6	Peggy Lopez	360-725-6804